

Power Cut by PureShores

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Summary:

Since returning from the Upside Down, El's powers haven't been the same. She worked so hard to return to them. Will her friends still want her once they find out? AV club and Mileven goodness.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Welcome to the first chapter of what I plan to be a two-part story. I hope you'll enjoy reading it. In it, you'll find my take on Eleven's return to Hawkins, and some Mileven, because I liked that a lot.

In the first few days after El had battled the Demogorgan and disappeared, they'd all been half-expecting her to come back. After all, they'd seen their new friend do so many impossible things in just the week they'd known her; it didn't seem like evading certain death, and escaping another dimension was out of the realm of possibility.

But days passed, and she didn't come back.

Weeks passed, and she didn't come back.

Months passed, and she didn't come back.

Before they knew it, it had almost been a year.

She came back.

It happened one night when they'd gathered at the Dungeon Master's house for another new campaign. It wasn't quite the same as in the pre-El days; Mike's heart just didn't seem to be fully in it anymore. He tried valiantly to recapture the old magic of campaigns past, but they could all tell he was wondering why they were bothering with imaginary adventures when they'd had a real one. Who cared about defeating the monsters and saving the proud princess when they weren't able to save El, who'd saved them?

Even though she'd never actually joined them for a D & D campaign, her absence seemed to be felt most keenly on those long days in Mike's basement. Perhaps because the basement had been where she'd made her home, perhaps because certain twists in the campaign made Mike pause and swallow before he announced them, leaving no doubt as to what or who had inspired them.

They rarely talked about her. It hurt Mike to think of her, and it hurt Will to think about any reminder of the Upside Down. So Lucas and Dustin carefully avoided the subject in the presence of their friends. Occasionally, when it was just the two of them, they'd relive some of El's greatest hits, like rescuing Mike from the quarry (described in great detail by Dustin to Lucas who of course, hadn't been there) and of course, the infamous van flip (to this day, one of the coolest things they'd ever seen.) They never forgot the superhero stuff, but after a while, the girl herself began to fade into a kind of legendary figure in their minds-totally awesome, but had she really been real?

Yes she had, as they were all quickly reminded of when the knock came at the Wheeler's front door.

Lucas had been upstairs in the kitchen, getting more soda, during a campaign break. Normally, being Mike's house, he would be the one to do such a chore, but he, Will and Dustin were embroiled in a good-natured argument about which Star Wars character was the best. He was actually smiling, an increasingly rare occurrence these days, so Lucas left them to it.

An armful of Cokes later, he was heading for the stairs, when he heard Chief Hopper's voice through the open door.

"I know it's late, Karen," he was saying, twisting his hat in his hands, "but I didn't know what else to do." He lowered his voice, and Lucas had to sneak forward a few paces in order to still hear him. "Ever since I picked her up three hours ago, she's said exactly three words. 'Hungry' 'no' and 'Mike.'"

Lucas froze. It couldn't be. Could it?

"I don't understand," said Mrs Wheeler. "Who is this? I've never seen her before. How does she know Michael?"

She was blocking the door, so Lucas couldn't see who they were talking about, but the suspicion only grew stronger as the Chief went on.

"I'm sure you remember that business with the Byers boy last year."

Mrs Wheeler nodded. The town of Hawkins wouldn't be forgetting about that any time soon. A little boy lost, and then found again, thought to be dead, but alive. It had been a tough week on everyone but especially on Joyce and Jonathan Byers, and Will's friends. Mike in particular had been especially shaken by it all. Her boy hadn't been the same since.

"Well, long story short, this girl here had a pretty big hand in it, and from what I can guess, got a bit attached to your son."

It clicked instantly. "This is El?" she asked, with a gasp. She'd heard the name from Mike, over and over, but never thought she'd actually get to put the name to a face.

"Yes ma'am," said the Chief, and then, in a gentler tone. "Come here El, and say hi to Mrs Wheeler."

There was a shuffling sound outside of the door, another audible gasp from Mrs Wheeler, and then Lucas heard it, the voice he never thought they'd hear again.

"Hello." And then, almost immediately. "Mike?"

Holy shit. The Coke cans clattered to the floor, making the Chief, El, and Mrs Wheeler turn towards the noise. Upon spotting him, El's eyes softened in recognition.

"Lucas."

He rushed forward, still not quite believing what he was seeing. Her hair was longer, her skin was paler, she was thinner, but it was her. She was back. He almost wanted to hug her, but she looked so frail that he worried she might snap in two if he tried. So he settled for grinning at her from ear to ear, and was pleased to see her tentatively smile back.

She was actually here. Alive.

Mike was going to flip.

"El! You're alive! How did you—when did you—I can't believe..." He had so many questions and exclamations that he couldn't even finish

one without moving on to the next. The result was both the adults looking at him like he'd grown a second head, and El giving him that terrified, overwhelmed look she'd given them all on the night they'd found her, wide-eyed and twitchy, like a cornered animal paralysed by fear.

"All right kid, back off," growled Hopper. "Give the girl a break. You won't get any answers anyway. Like I said, she hasn't been too chatty." He turned to Mrs Wheeler. "She's been asking for your boy constantly, Karen. I don't think I'm gonna get anywhere with her till she's seen him. Just ten minutes. Please?"

"Please?" echoed Eleven, looking plaintively up at her. "Mike? Please?"

Mrs Wheeler let out an audible sigh, as Eleven continued to gaze up at her. Lucas could tell she was relenting, because Mike had looked exactly the same way that fateful night when he'd decided to bring El home with them. Maybe being susceptible to El was a Wheeler family trait. "Well...okay. But ten minutes only. It's a school night. Lucas, can you go call him please?"

Lucas didn't need to be told twice. He dodged around the scattered Coke cans and bolted for the stairs to the basement bellowing 'MIKE! MIKE!' at the top of his lungs.

"What?!" came his best friend's irritated response.

"Get up here! Now! All of you!"

"What for?"

"There's something you've gotta see."

"What?"

"I can't say, just get up here!"

"Why can't you just tell me?"

Frustrated at Mike's belligerence, Lucas didn't hear or notice El's approach until she was by his side. Hovering at the top of the stairs,

as if debating whether or not she dared to go down them.

“Mike?” she called softly. “Mike?”

Silence from the basement.

She tried again. “Mike?” And again, slightly panicky now. “Mike?!”

And then, finally, “Lucas, is that-?” Mike’s voice trailed off, as though to finish the sentence might get his hopes up even more.

“Like I said,” yelled Lucas. “Get up here!”

A crash was heard from the basement, and Lucas knew it had been caused by Mike’s chair toppling over, as his quick footsteps dashed for the staircase.

A week later, safe in the Wheeler’s basement, with Mike and Nancy away at school, Ted at work, and Karen and Holly out running errands, El narrowed her eyes at the toy Millennium Falcon resting on the floor. She was staying at the Wheeler’s until a more permanent arrangement could be made, though she privately hoped she could stay here forever. She liked being back in her fort, and she especially liked being near Mike. She’d missed him terribly in the Upside Down. Before Mike, she hadn’t known that one could ‘miss’ somebody, and she certainly hadn’t had anyone in her life whose presence she had craved when they weren’t around. Not even Papa.

She was glad of the solitude for the moment however, as it meant she could try and use her powers without fear of discovery. Mike had cautioned her against using them in front of Holly and his parents, at least for the moment.

‘Nancy and I are OK,’ he’d said, when he brought her morning Eggos down to her. “You can do whatever you want when it’s just us. But Mom and Dad don’t know what you can do yet, and you might kind of freak them out.”

She latched on to a familiar word, pointed to herself, and asked, “Freak?” She’d heard the word used to describe her several times now. Maybe ‘freak’ was something a person could just be, like tall or

skinny.

Mike's eyes had bugged out with horror, and he'd practically fallen over himself to reassure her.

"No way!" he'd blurted, so loudly it had made her flinch. "I mean... uh, you're not a freak El. You're awesome. You're the coolest person I know." He said all this very quickly, and refused to meet her eyes afterwards. He seemed uncomfortable. Why was he upset? Was he mad at her?

Before she'd had a chance to ask him, he'd had to leave for school, waving to her as he ran for the staircase and promising he'd see her later. That was one of the nicest things about living here. When people left they always came back.

She harnessed her mind like Papa had taught her, and concentrated hard on the toy spaceship. Slowly, it rose a few inches off the ground and hovered for a moment, before falling back to earth with a crash. She groaned in mingled frustration and exhaustion.

Ever since she'd gotten back, her powers hadn't been working the same as usual. It was taking more and more effort just to perform simple tasks, like lifting the Falcon. She supposed escaping from the Upside Down had taken more of a toll on her than she realised, and so her powers were taking longer to recharge. She'd been quite severely weakened after the Demogorgan anyway, and a year in that awful place only made things worse. But what if they didn't come back at all? How was she supposed to help her friends, and protect them, without her powers?

Mike didn't know. Even though they'd spent nearly every spare moment together, he'd been more interested in getting her food and fresh clothes, resettling her in the fort, and showing her comics then quizzing her about her powers. She had always liked that about him, the way he had always treated her like a person and not a science experiment. He was the first one who ever had, reaching out for her even when Dustin and Lucas had shrunk back on that first stormy night.

He had come home from school yesterday with a black eye, and she'd

been nearly consumed with anger that she was no longer strong enough to go and find that awful mouthbreather Troy, and rebreak that arm of his, plus maybe a leg or his collarbone for good measure. She wanted to hurt him, punish him for harming Mike.

Mike was kind. Mike was safety, and warmth. Why would somebody want to hurt him? She couldn't understand it.

She kept trying for a little while longer until blood was streaming from her nose, and the exhaustion threatened to overwhelm her. She let the Falcon drop for the last time just as the front door opened and Mike's mother returned. She never left Eleven at home alone for too long, for which the girl was grateful.

"El?" called Mrs Wheeler uncertainly down the stairs. "Is everything okay?"

The true answer of course, was no. She was weak. Her powers weren't working properly, and every time she closed her eyes she was taken back to the Upside Down. But she knew she couldn't let anyone else know that. Papa had always punished her when she was weak. Perhaps Mrs Wheeler would too. All she'd ever known of grown-ups was pain and sadness and fear. What if they were all like that? They might send her away, separate her forever from Mike and her other friends

And what of them, her friends? Would they still want to be her friends if they found out she was no longer capable of the 'awesome' things she had once been? Would Lucas change his mind about her again? Would Dustin still want to hang out with her? Would Will ever trust her? And Mike, what would he do? She had seen first hand his loyalty to his friends, and she couldn't believe he would turn his back on her.

Then again, he'd been acting a little oddly the last few days, as though her presence made him nervous. Why was he like that? Had he guessed? She hoped not.

There was just too much at risk by telling the truth. So she lied.

"Yes," she replied, "I'm fine."

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for the great response to Chapter One. This one contains lots of Mileven and someone finding out about El's little problem.

Lucas waited impatiently at the bike racks after school let out, waiting for his friends to join him. It was Friday afternoon, which meant that two glorious days of no school and Dungeons and Dragons were finally here.

First Dustin came hurrying towards him, complaining he was hungry and impatient to get back to Mike's place for snacks. Will was next; even after all this time, he still found himself getting waylaid by teachers in the hall who wanted to check how he was doing. Last of all was Mike, glancing furtively over his shoulder, no doubt keeping an eye out for Troy. He'd had several run-ins with the bully this week, and they'd all noticed the dangerous glint in El's eyes every time she came across a new injury to her precious Mike. While he would always be happy to see Troy get his comeuppance, he hoped for his sake that he never crossed paths with Eleven again. Hell, she'd already broken his arm, what would be the next step up? If he were a bigger person, he'd almost feel sorry for Troy. Almost.

Mike was moving a little more gingerly than usual, which immediately made the others suspect another injury. After some persuasion, which ranged from gentle coaxing to direct threats, he lifted the side of his sweater to reveal a nasty-looking bruise.

"Don't let El see that," Dustin remarked. "She's still twitchy about the black eye. This would push her over the edge; she'd go full X-Men." He looked excited at the prospect. "Just imagine what she could do to him."

"He'd deserve it," said Will, emphatically, having been subjected to the bully himself many times in the past. He was also keen to see for himself these superpowers that he had heard so much about from the other three.

"No!" snapped Mike. "What if somebody saw, they could expose her, and those bastards from the lab might find her. She wouldn't risk that." She'd spent too long at the mercy of those lunatics, he'd be damned if he let them get their hands on her again. "She's smarter than that."

"Don't be so sure." Lucas held up his right forearm, showing off the wide scar that he'd gotten courtesy of a quick flight through a junkyard a year ago. "She doesn't like people messing with you, man. And I got the battle scars to prove it. "

"That's not fair, Lucas. You know that was an accident." It was like an involuntary reflex, the way Mike defended her from any accusation, and Lucas raised an eyebrow.

"An accident. Sure."

Even though he and Eleven had long since moved past that disagreement, he didn't think he'd ever forget that feeling of her rage washing over him, and the sheer force of her throwing him across the yard, with him helpless to stop it. And no matter what Mike said, he thought that she'd definitely had some measure of control when she'd done it, if not they'd have both gone flying. Instead, only he had been launched away, while her beloved Mike remained safely on the ground, out of harm's way.

The other three boys grimaced, and Mike looked away guiltily from the injury, remembering the fight that had caused it.

"I'm not trying to make you feel bad," Lucas went on. "I'm just saying, I don't see you being on the receiving end of the El rage offensive anytime soon." He smirked. "Though she might kiss you to death one day, once she figures out what kissing is."

He'd expected Mike to snap back at him for that, he was very touchy about comments like that, but for some reason he just turned a deep scarlet as the other three sniggered quietly. What was that about?

They hadn't--? No forget it, he didn't want to know.

"You guys are jerks," Mike said. "Why am I friends with you anyway?"

Besides, I'm fine," he said, attempting to sound nonchalant. "It's just a bruise, not anything Troy hasn't done before. He's an asshole. And don't any of you dare and tell El. She only just came back. I—uh—we don't want to lose her again."

The other three exchanged glances, and made a silent decision not to tease him about that little slip up. There'd be another one soon enough.

The party jumped on their bikes (Mike wincing with pain all the while) and rode for Mike's place, chatting and cheering excitedly that the weekend was finally here. He liked this time of the day, when it was just the four of them, like old times. Before Demogorgans and bad men and the Upside Down when their biggest problem had been Troy, and next week's algebra test. If somebody had told him then that Will would be lost in another dimension and they'd meet a girl with superpowers he would have called them crazy. And if they'd told him Mike would end up with a massive crush on her, he'd have laughed them out of Hawkins.

Back then; Mike would rather have died than admit to having a crush on a girl that wasn't Princess Leia. Old Mike had barely had the guts to speak to a girl. True, he hadn't actually admitted how he felt about Eleven, but he didn't really need to. He made it incredibly obvious, particularly to people who knew him well. His best friend had many strengths, but subtlety was not one of them.

When they arrived, it was to find El sitting in the front room window waiting for them, an Eggo in hand. The smile that appeared on her face when she spotted them widened when her gaze landed on Mike, and he promptly went to pieces, like he did every day, in his haste to get off the bike, resulting in him almost tripping over his own feet, and more snickers from his friends.

She came outside to meet them, and Mike greeted her as enthusiastically as if they'd been separated for eons, rather than a few hours, asking her what she'd done that day. Was she warm enough? Had she eaten? Slept? Was she okay? The list went on, and Lucas rolled his eyes at Dustin and Will, who both grinned.

He'd been wrong about the idea that Mike would go back to his old

self now that Eleven was back. Sure he was happier, more involved, and generally more cheery. But old Mike had never been this stupid over a girl before. They'd all had the odd crush here and there, but nothing like this. And Mike was also in the unprecedented position of the girl he liked actually liking him back. That had certainly never happened before to any of the others. It was completely uncharted territory.

"Mike. I missed you." Four soft words from El put a stop to Mike's ream of questions and he looked both thrilled and utterly mortified. It must be nice, Lucas thought, to have as few inhibitions as El seemed to have. To have the freedom to say anything that came to mind, and damn the consequences. Life would probably be a whole lot simpler.

"I was only gone for a few hours El," he said, gently, but looking pleased all the same.

Eleven shrugged. "Don't like it when you leave," she said, simply.

As one, Lucas, Dustin and Will entered the house and made their way down the basement, leaving the two lovebirds to themselves for the moment. This too, was taking some getting used to, knowing the right moment to escape before things got too mushy. It was usually pretty easy to spot; you could practically feel the heat coming off Mike, he'd turn so red.

They tucked into the snacks that Mrs Wheeler had left for them, Will began to draw, and Lucas and Dustin set up the D&D board for today's campaign. A few minutes later, Mike and El joined them, both smiling a little about something, but the other three knew better than to ask about it. It was just too embarrassing for everybody (except maybe El,) and while the fresh ammunition for teasing was a bonus, they'd come to a mutual decision that they as Mike's closest friends, did not want to know the details of his newfound love life. Friends didn't lie, but that didn't mean they had to share everything.

The day's campaign began. El, who usually hovered at Mike's side during D&D, watching the game with awe, retreated to the fort, and let the blankets drop, shielding her from view. That was weird. She normally loved hanging out with them.

He wasn't the only one who'd noticed. He saw Mike's eyes flick towards the fort with a bit of concern, and Dustin poked Mike in the arm.

"What did you do to her?" he asked. "Tell her she's not the prettiest girl in town or something?"

"Why would I say that? She is...I mean...um..." He immediately busied himself with leafing through the book, but Dustin wasn't about to let the subject drop that easily.

"Dude you must have done something. She's acting all weird."

"I didn't do anything!"

"Leave her alone," Lucas said, intervening before the argument got nasty. "Maybe she just wants to be by herself for a while."

Inside her blanket fortress, El was grateful when Lucas put an end to the bickering, and was relieved to hear her friends resuming their game. When she was sure they were safely absorbed in their imaginary world, she turned her attention back to her powers. Trying to force them didn't seem to be getting her anywhere, but she'd had the idea that if she just sat quietly and let her thoughts wander for a while, she might be able to relax a little. and hopefully pinpoint what exactly was stopping her. Papa had got her to do this sometimes, when she'd struggled, or dared to question the tasks he had set her.

"Find the reason why you are weak," he would say. "Find it Eleven, and cast it out. Don't disappoint me again."

It had never worked very well, at the lab, probably because she had always been tired after trying to use her powers, and so very afraid of being punished, and locked away. Stress only made it harder. Which was why she'd decided to try it here, in the place she felt safest; in the soft hideaway Mike had built for her, with all her friends' laughter just outside. She could hear Dustin let out an excited whoop, as Mike dramatically acted out the demise of the latest monster. This campaign was a particularly exciting one; she knew because he'd told her about it yesterday, after he'd finished writing it, and had seemed very proud of it. She'd liked seeing him so sure of himself; it was a

side of him he didn't show very often, but she wished he would. She thought he was the smartest, kindest, best person she knew. He made her happy.

She allowed thoughts of him to fill her mind, as she closed her eyes. Immediately, she could see the Upside Down in her mind's eye; so much darkness and fear and loneliness. She'd never known the concept of loneliness before she'd escaped the lab, never understood why she could feel so isolated when there were always people around. Even if she couldn't see or hear them, they were always there. When she'd met Mike, Lucas and Dustin, she'd learned about friendship, and kindness and trust, and she focused on these things now, pushing the images of the Upside Down from her memory. Dustin teaching her about superheros and Star Wars, the day she and Lucas had put their differences aside, the way Will seemed to understand her from the moment they first met, and the time Mike had said she was pretty. They were her friends, and they needed her, and her powers, to keep them safe. She owed it to them; after all, they'd given her so much.

She had to do this for them, to protect them.

She'd stolen the Millennium Falcon and hid it in here so she could practice without them seeing, and she concentrated on it with all her might. Her nose was bleeding and the effort was sapping her strength as she fought with everything she had to keep the spaceship in the air longer than a few seconds. If anything, it was harder now than it had been earlier. Her friends' voices outside were a constant reminder that she was failing them, that if the bad men were to burst in right now, she would be powerless to help them. They would look to her to save the day like she always did, and she would not be able to do it.

She wiped the blood from her nose and tried again, putting every ounce of concentration she possessed into the job, so much so, that she didn't notice the blankets being moved apart, and a head appearing through the gap until it spoke.

"El? Are you hungry, because it's time for...Whoa."

Mike. Oh no. Now he would know, and he would kick her out of the house and...

“Are you okay El? What’s wrong? Do you want me to get Mike?”

Not Mike then. As her eyes came back into focus, she realized that the speaker was Lucas.

“Just wait here a minute,” he said. “He’s upstairs.”

“No!” she leaned forward and grabbed Lucas by the wrist. He may know her secret now but it was imperative Mike didn’t find out, it would only make him worry. “Don’t want him to know.”

“Know what?” asked Lucas, curiously. “Your powers aren’t a secret from us El.”

She shook her head in frustration; he wasn’t getting it. “Look.”

She concentrated on the Falcon again. It hovered for about three seconds before it fell. And again, this time it had barely lifted from the ground before it plummeted back. Lucas watched on in horror as her nose began bleeding again, and her eyes threatened to close.

“Something’s wrong with your powers?” he asked, and she nodded fervently. It felt good to tell somebody.

“How long?”

“Since the Upside Down.”

Lucas crawled into the fort and sat beside her. His presence wasn’t quite as comforting as Mike’s, (who would put his arm around her and draw her in close) but he made a good substitute. She hadn’t realised how lonely she had been feeling until he scooted up to sit next to her.

“I guess you had to use a lot of power to get out of there, huh?”

She nodded. After her escape from the other dimension, she’d fallen unconscious and only awoken when Hopper had found her. She’d had no idea how much time had passed in between, but she’d been ravenously hungry and very cold.

“Do you think they’ll come back?” she asked.

Lucas had very little experience with telekinetic powers outside of comic books, so he couldn't really say for sure, but he couldn't imagine El without her powers. They were a part of her.

"I hope so. Does it feel strange without them?"

She considered this for a moment, and then nodded. "Scared. Feels like I'm half-gone."

"Half-gone?"

She pointed to herself, and then turned over the gameboard again to represent the Upside Down. "Here. And here too."

"Like you left some of you in the Upside Down?" Lucas asked uncertainly. Feelings were much more Mike's area than his. She nodded.

"And Mike doesn't know?" Lucas asked, though already sure of the answer, which was confirmed when she shook her head. "Why don't you want to tell him?"

"He'll be mad at me."

Lucas scoffed. "Are you crazy? Mike couldn't be mad at you if he tried. If anything, he'd manage to twist it around until it was somehow my fault. As if I'd scared you into losing your powers or something."

She shook her head. The two instances in which Mike had shouted or snapped at her were clear in her mind. She didn't ever want him to look at her like that again; as though she'd disappointed him. It would be like disappointing Papa, only worse, because Papa had wanted her to do bad things. Mike was kind and good and if she had disappointed him it would mean that she had been bad. She didn't want to be bad.

She explained all this to Lucas, who now wished more than ever that she would let him get Mike. Everything she was saying made perfect sense when she put it so simply, but that was exactly the problem. It wasn't that simple. Her 'papa' had been a dangerous psychopath, for one, and she didn't seem to have grasped the concept that 'angry' and

'bad' were not always the same thing, along with a myriad of other variables that applied to the situation. This kind of complex explanation was usually Mike's domain when it came to El; Lucas was far, far out of his ballpark here.

"You'll have to tell him eventually, you know. Friends don't lie," he added, borrowing one of her favourite phrases.

"Not yet," she said, and then narrowed her eyes at him. "Promise?"

What choice did he have? Mike would be furious if he found out he'd kept something this important from him, and El would be furious if he didn't. But even without her powers, El was still scarier than Mike by a long way. Besides, he kind of liked that she had confided in him, even if only accidentally. They were getting to be real friends now, instead of just two people who happened to be friends with the same people.

"Promise."

Notes for the Chapter:

I know I said initially this would only be two parts but I think it might be a couple more. I hope you'll join me in them.

3. Chapter Three

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks once again for all the kudos and comments. I'm glad people are enjoying this story. I hope you like this chapter.

Never in their lifelong friendship had Lucas ever kept a secret like this from Mike. Sure, there had been the little things, like birthday surprises (like the Supercoms) and the time he'd had a crush on Julie Newton in their math class, but when it came to important stuff he'd always kept Mike in the loop. Until now.

He'd promised El that he wouldn't say anything, but it was getting harder every day. Now he knew what he was looking for, he could see it getting worse all the time. She often showed signs of recent nosebleeds and she was quiet and withdrawn at times when they were in a group. She was outeating all of them (even Dustin) at mealtimes, and Mike said she was sleeping from early evenings until well into the next morning.

Lucas might not be an expert on superpowers but he knew enough about cause and effect to piece together all this evidence and conclude that she was expounding massive amounts of energy in an attempt to get her powers back. She was eating and sleeping more in an attempt to balance things out, but having seen some of the things she could do at full power, he could only imagine the amount of energy they would require; energy that at the moment, she was unable to muster.

Frankly, he was starting to worry about her, and what might happen if she pushed herself too hard. He was pretty sure none of them wanted another visit from Robo-Mike, who had replaced his best friend in her absence, and he had an inkling that she might not be able to pull off another miraculous escape from the Upside Down.

He tried to find time away from the other guys each time they all met up to check in with her, and was pleased that she at least seemed to be in generally good spirits. She was getting to know Will, laughing

at Dustin's antics, and still spent plenty of time at Mike's side, gazing up at him adoringly when she thought he wasn't looking.

As for Mike himself, Lucas had always known he could be kind of dumb for a smart kid, but his total obliviousness when it came to what was going on with El made him want to punch him. It was beyond him how Mike could spend so much time with her, day in and day out and yet still not realise that something was up. He could only conclude from his observations of Mike that this kind of intense crush could turn you from unobservant into an utter imbecile. He also had the distinct impression that El was encouraging this by finding mundane item after mundane item for Mike to explain to her, such as telephones, Lord of the Rings and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

What the hell had they been teaching her in that lab? She seemed almost totally devoid of basic life skills, yet she certainly knew a thing or two about secrecy and deception. At least, she knew enough to realise she should be keeping her number one fan happily distracted and unsuspecting, and therefore not questioning how her habits had changed so much in such a short period of time.

He still didn't understand why El was so determined to keep Mike in the dark about her power problems, and he'd tried to explain to her many times that he and the others wouldn't give a damn if she could flip vans with her mind or not, she would still be their friend. She didn't seem to believe him, even though he could tell that she very much wanted to. Another by-product of the lab, he supposed, where she'd been taught her whole life that she was valuable only for the things she could do for them.

She couldn't be more wrong of course. She was now a permanent fixture in their party, powers or no powers, and despite her doubts, Lucas knew with 100% certainty that Mike wouldn't like her any less, or make any less of a fool of himself in her presence. In fact, it might even speed things along a little; at the moment he seemed to have the idea that she was too good for him, perhaps it would even be playing field a little.

El hadn't listened to him when he'd told her that, and he knew that the only way she'd believe it was to hear it from Mike himself, which

was never going to happen because she refused to tell him anything.

For his part, Lucas thought they were both being incredibly stupid, and that everything would be a lot easier for everyone if Mike would just man up and get on with it already. He was overthinking it way too much. Hell, Mike could take her to the corner store on the back of his bicycle and call it a date and Eleven would think it was the greatest thing in the world. But he didn't bother suggesting it because nobody ever listened to him, and well, that was just Mike. He'd always spent too much time in his own head.

It was a relief to have Lucas know what was happening with her powers. Even if he didn't really have any way he could help, it was nice to know he cared enough to ask after her and make sure she was all right. It gave her a chance to unload her frustration on someone at her sudden inability to do what she had always taken for granted. Back in the lab, she had always been scared, but she had always been strong. Eventually she'd noticed the way the people would back carefully out of a room she was in, keeping a close eye on her all the while. They had been scared of her. They were afraid of what she could do, and of what Papa would tell her to do to them, so they tended to give her a wide berth.

She didn't want to hurt them. She never had. She did it to please Papa, and because he would punish her if she didn't. She did it to survive.

Papa said she had to do things for him because he took care of her. He said he deserved it because he loved her, and when people loved each other, they did things for each other. He loved her, so he kept her safe in the lab. She loved him, (or at least she'd thought she had) so she listened to the people, and did the things he asked, even if they frightened her. It never even occurred to her that there might be a different way to live.

Now her powers were gone. She had relied on them to keep her safe, and her friends too. What was she supposed to do now?

"El?"

Mike was crouching outside the blanket fort, hesitant about coming in. She'd been having a tough time keeping her secret from him, with the result that she had taken to spending a lot of time down here on her own, especially when the guys came around. Lucas kept glancing at her, looking worried, and though she appreciated the thought, she wished he wouldn't. Sooner or later, Mike would notice, and he was clever. He'd figure it out. And then what might he do? She didn't want to lose him.

"El?" he asked, again. "Are you okay?"

Of all the things in her new life she was grateful for, Mike was the best one. He was the one who had been most responsible for teaching her about how someone really treated people they cared for. None of the conditions that had gone along with Papa, none of the 'I do something for you, so you must do something for me' mentality. Mike was the exact opposite.

Mike, who brought her presents and trinkets, sometimes just because he thought she'd like the shiny pebble he'd found on the way to school. Mike, who taught her to use the SuperCom when she'd asked him to, and explained all sorts of things to her, even though to him it must be very basic knowledge. Mike always seemed pleased to see her when he came home at the end of the day. She could count on one hand the amount of times Papa had ever smiled at her, or said something kind when he wasn't trying to persuade her to do something. Papa had frightened her on more than one occasion. Mike took care of her.

"I'm okay."

She hated lying to him. She'd never concealed anything from him before, if she were scared or sad or excited or nervous or anything in between, she would find Mike, and he would make it better. The first few days after she'd gotten back, she'd never wanted to be anywhere but at his side, all day and all night. She liked Nancy well enough, but she was wary of his mother, father and other sister, and had been slightly overwhelmed by all the unfamiliarity of her new life. He had seemed to understand; and kept her close. She felt safer with him near, and braver.

His family hadn't really known what to make of it. She'd noticed his parents watching them curiously, and the way Nancy sometimes turned quickly away from them as though trying not to laugh. She asked Mike why, one day, and he'd simply turned red and changed the subject.

In the end, after nearly three full days had passed, his mother had gently but firmly forced them to separate, telling them that they both needed to have their own space sometimes, and reassuring El that she was safe with their family. It had taken some time before she'd believed her.

"Are you sure?" he probed, gently. "You're spending a lot of time down here. Have I done something wrong?"

Of course he hadn't.

"I don't know what I did to make you mad," he went on, sounding miserable. "But I'm so sorry, El. Really."

She badly wanted to crawl out and give him a hug, and reassure him that she wasn't mad at him, could never be mad at him. If anything, she was mad at herself, and losing her powers, and the Upside Down, and all the bad things that were happening to her. Sometimes she wondered if he would have been better off if they had never met. If somebody else had found her on that fateful night, and had her carted back to the lab. Sure, she would still be a prisoner of Papa and the bad men, but he would be safe and happy, instead of always worrying about her.

"Not your fault," she said. "I'm okay."

He would worry even more if he found out about her powers. He might fear for his safety, and the safety of his family if he knew that she couldn't protect them. Every day she was here she was putting them at risk, but she didn't want to leave this place, which was the first home she'd ever known.

"You can talk to me, you know," he said. "You can tell me anything, even if it's something I might not want to hear. That's what friends are for."

“I know.”

“Okay.” He sounded disappointed, and she knew he’d been hoping that she might open up to him about whatever was bothering her, but she couldn’t yet. Not until she knew what she was dealing with. So she dismissed him as gently as she could.

“Goodnight Mike.”

He sighed. “Night El.”

She listened as his footsteps receded as he went back upstairs. It was only early but she was tired today, after trying extra hard to make her powers get back to normal. Maybe there was something else she could do. There had been times back in the lab when her powers randomly weakened or had done unexpected things; and when that happened, she had been surrounded by people. They poked and prodded at her, and came up with all sorts of ridiculous theories about why it was happening. Some had told Papa that he should stop making her use her powers so often. ‘She’s only a child,’ they would say. “This isn’t right.” But she noticed that the people who said those things to Papa; she never saw them again.

Papa had never liked it when people disagreed with him or defied him, and the other scientists soon learned not to question him. Instead, they’d get her to practice as much as possible, and to do things like simple puzzles, and what they called ‘brain training’ exercises, telling Papa all the while that the key was to make her stronger. If she were stronger, her powers would be too.

They were right. It took time, and effort, but she had become strong. Strong enough to get away, to break a bully’s arm, to flip a van, to defeat a monster. To kill them all. She wanted to be strong again.

Mike’s SuperCom was nestled in the blankets near her feet. He let her keep it with her most of the time, because he knew she liked fiddling with it. Sometimes the noise of the static was comforting when it was dark and she was alone. She switched to channel six, and pressed the button nervously. She had never done this before.

“Lucas?” she called. “Lucas, are you there?” She knew he was within

range, because Mike had told her so. She just had to hope that he was listening.

Luckily, he was.

“El?” He sounded astounded to hear from her. “Is that you? What’s wrong?”

“Lucas.” She considered for a moment on how best to pose the next question. “We are friends?” She could never be 100% sure. Lucas had been the last of their group to warm to her (besides Will, for obvious reasons), and even now, with all the animosity behind them, there were moments when she felt a little uncomfortable around him.

“Well, yeah.” He seemed taken aback by the question. “Of course we are.”

“And friends do anything for each other?”

“Yeah...” he agreed, cautiously, frantically racking his brains in order to figure out what ‘anything’ could entail. With El, you never knew. But if it involved any kind of awkward explanation, he would be forwarding her enquiry onto Mike.

“I need your help.”

The next day at school, Dustin turned to Lucas in the cafeteria after they got their lunches and asked, without preamble, “So are you and El a thing now or what?”

“What?” Lucas was inherently grateful that Mike was still in the lunch line and hadn’t heard that. Will was out sick today with a cold. He’d been getting sick a lot more often since the Upside Down, and they were all desperately hoping that it was simply a coincidence.

“Seems like you two have got a secret,” Dustin went on. “You whisper to each other all the time.”

Sometimes, it was so easy to see Dustin merely as the clown of their group that they all forgot how annoyingly observant he could be. Yes,

he and El were hiding something, but it wasn't that.

"We're not a thing. Not even close."

Dustin accepted this. "Yeah, I didn't really think you were, but it was worth it to see the look on your face." He snickered to himself, as he peeled back the lid of his pudding cup. "Just as well. I think Mike would kill you dead if he thought you were moving in on his girl."

"She's not actually his girl," Lucas felt obliged to point out.

Dustin shrugged. "She will be, if he ever gets his act together and asks her."

He couldn't argue with that.

"But you do have a secret." Dustin went on. It was a statement, not a question.

"Kind of," he admitted. "I'm giving her a hand with something, but she doesn't want anyone else to know."

"She told you and not Mike?" Dustin's incredulity made him put down his spoonful of pudding and eye Lucas in surprise. "She tells him everything."

"Not this, apparently."

"And I guess you're not going to tell me what it is either."

"No. She made me promise."

Dustin shook his head, and then glanced across the room to watch Mike carefully wending his way through the many tables towards them. He narrowly avoided a collision with Troy by quickly darting behind some tall eighth-graders, until the bully and his cronie had passed by.

"There's a lot of secrets in this group at the moment," said Dustin. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Notes for the Chapter:

I know you are probably waiting impatiently for Mike to find out about El's powers (or lack thereof), but please bear with me. I have a plan in mind for how it will unfold. I just really liked the idea of Lucas being her confidante, at least for now.

4. Chapter Four

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm very sorry that this took so long to update, and I thank you if you have decided to stick with me, and this story. I hope you enjoy.

“Come on, El! You can do it.”

They were standing under the tallest tree in Lucas' backyard, with the afternoon sunlight streaming through the leaves. Eleven was squinting at the branches of the tree, oblivious to the new trickle of blood coming from her nose.

“Don't give up!” Lucas' encouragement came at just the right time, as she felt the power starting to sap from her body for the umpteenth time. She steeled herself, focused harder. She could do this. This was a tiny thing compared to what she had once been able to do. She had taken out a monster; she would not be defeated by a tree.

With a deep groaning sound, the branches began to move, flailing wildly as though caught in a strong gale. Five seconds, ten seconds, fifteen...this was the longest she had been able to do it up until now. Lucas whooped enthusiastically, and from somewhere within, El mustered up the energy to smile at him.

That was a mistake; the momentary lapse in concentration was enough to put her off her stride. The branches stilled and she staggered sideways, falling against the trunk, breathing hard.

Lucas was at her side in a flash, ready to catch her in case her body failed her completely, as it had done the first day when she'd pushed herself too hard. It hadn't been fun explaining to Mike why she'd been so pale when he'd gotten her back to his house.

It had been a week since El had radioed asking for his help, and Lucas had risen to the challenge. They'd been meeting each day to

practice, and it had been a learning curve for both of them. It was tricky coming up with ways to test and extend her without pushing it too far, and Eleven's growing frustration at the situation only made that process all the more difficult.

However, she was beginning to show small signs of improvement. She wasn't anywhere near ready to kick some bad men ass just yet but if they kept at it, he was confident that she would be one day. And as he kept telling her, the bad men from the lab and the Demogorgan were all gone now. She didn't need to be at full power again. She was safe now.

She didn't seem convinced of that however, shaking her head whenever he tried to convince her that the danger had passed.

"They'll come back," she said. "They always come back. Must be ready."

He supposed this was the result of spending the first twelve years of her life as a lab rat. They'd treated her like a weapon, so that was how she saw herself, completely useless if she couldn't slay dragons and crush cars. And no matter what he said to her, he couldn't change her mind.

"I think maybe that's enough for today," he said, wincing as she wobbled her way away from the tree trunk.

"One more time?" She turned big, beseeching eyes on him, which she'd learned, that if used on Mike, would make him give in immediately to almost any request. But Lucas Sinclair was made of stronger stock. He looked her over with a critical eye. She was still shaky on her feet, she was sweating, her nose was still bleeding, and she looked exhausted.

"Enough," he said firmly, and when she opened her mouth to argue, he shot her a hard look. "You promised."

One of the conditions of his agreement to their arrangement was that he was able to call it off for the day the moment he thought it necessary. El was strong and incredibly brave, but she was still struggling to accept her own limitations, (after all, before this she'd

probably never even known that she had limitations) and he was a scientist at heart. He may not know much about superpowers but he knew a human body in distress when he saw one.

On a simpler level, he also didn't particularly like seeing one of his closest friends repeatedly push herself to exhaustion in pursuit of supernatural powers that she may not be able to get back.

He sincerely hoped that wouldn't be the case, but it was a possibility, after all, and he was nothing if not thorough.

She looked annoyed, but accepted his ruling. After all, she had promised.

"Come and sit down before you fall down," he said, opening the cooler they were keeping in the shade and handing her a can of soda. "Recharge your batteries." He tossed her the box of tissues as well. "I can't take you back to Mike's like this; he'll kill me."

El, who had been about to flip the ring pull of her soda, cut her eyes to him in alarm, and he immediately regretted his rash choice of words. Sometimes he forgot how literal El could be.

"Figure of speech, El" he explained. "I just mean he'd be mad at me."

Her face fell. "I don't like it when he's mad," she said.

Lucas rolled his eyes. "Mike wouldn't get mad at you," he corrected her. "You're a special case, El."

She smiled a little at this. He could tell she liked the idea of being 'special' to Mike, even if she didn't fully understand why it was so.

"Tell me a story?" she asked, lying back on the grass and watching the clouds float by.

Lucas had never been a natural storyteller (that was Mike's forte.) He couldn't make up fantastical adventures at the drop of a hat like his best friend could do, but he hated to disappoint El. So he recounted adventures he and the guys had had in the past, like the time they all went trick-or-treating in fifth grade and had ended up running away from Old Man Withers' house, who'd threatened them with the

sprinklers if they didn't get off his lawn. Or the day in second grade when Will was supposed to give a talk on butterflies, but had been so nervous he'd fainted clean away in front of their entire class. And the times when nothing crazy happened at all, when they'd just hung out and had fun.

She listened with rapt attention, giggling at the funny bits, and gasping at the tense ones, and Lucas could see why Mike enjoyed this so much; she was a very good audience. They lay there talking until the sun began to sink below the horizon, and the light began to fade.

At the end of a long anecdote about a disastrous sixth-grade science project they'd all taken part in, he glanced over at her and noticed she looked distracted.

"El, are you OK?" he asked.

She waited a while before answering. "We are different," she said. "You had friends, school, bikes, fun.... I didn't."

He cringed. Here he was complaining about a misfiring volcano project while she'd spent almost her whole life trapped in a cage at the mercy of a psychopath.

"I'm sorry, El," he said. "You should have just told me to shut up."

She shook her head. "No. I liked hearing your stories. I wish I had some too."

"Now you do," he pointed out. "You have a home and a family, and books and Eggos, and us."

"Yes," she agreed. "I'm happy."

They lay there in silence for a little while longer until the sun sank even lower and slight chill came to the air.

"C'mon El, lets get you home before Mrs Wheeler starts to worry," he said. "And before Mike sends out the National Guard."

Mike sat in the living room pretending to be watching a cartoon, but actually straining for any sound that might indicate Lucas and El were coming back. They'd been gone all day, yet again, and he wasn't sure how okay he was about it. He wanted El to have friends other than him, of course, and he was thrilled that she and Lucas had apparently moved past their bad start. All the same, would it kill her to spend just a little time with him once she returned home in the evening? It was the same every night, Lucas would walk her home, she'd join the family for dinner, where she'd eat a massive portion each night (and occasionally seconds) then she'd take a shower and go right to the fort, and stay there.

If his mother, father and Nancy had found this behaviour unusual, they hadn't said anything to him about it. He'd asked them about it one night after she'd retreated to the fort. His mom had told him to be patient, that El was making a big adjustment, and that people dealt with that in different ways. Nancy had said that El would talk to him when she was ready, and not to try and rush her. His father's advice had simply been: "Women can be like that, son. Men were never meant to understand them." This information had been the least helpful of all and had earned his father dirty looks from both Nancy and his wife.

Outside he could hear voices, and the tick, tick, tick of the wheels of a bicycle. He sprang up from his chair to see Lucas and El coming down the driveway. He couldn't help noticing that she was walking along beside the bicycle rather than riding along with Lucas, and that made him smile. She looked tired, but in good spirits, and he wondered for the umpteenth time what it was that they were doing. He'd asked Lucas yesterday, but his best friend had plead the Fifth, saying that he'd promised El. From this, Mike had learned that the two of them had a secret, and it was driving him crazy not to know what it was.

Dustin and Will (who he'd complained about this to many times over the past week) had told him to stop being so neurotic, and to leave them alone. Dustin had told him flat-out that he was acting like a jealous idiot.

"She's allowed to hang out with other people, Mike," he'd said. "And even if she's not telling you all her deepest, darkest secrets, aren't

you glad that she's at least telling someone, rather than dealing with it by herself?"

He was glad about that. Really, he was. He just missed her; that was all. Even though she was living in the same house, just a flight of stairs away, he missed her, and how close they used to be. He didn't tell the guys that part; they'd use that to tease him for the rest of their lives.

He crept over to the window just as El and Lucas reached the door and said their goodbyes. He tried not to be upset when El reached over and gave his best friend a quick hug.

'Jealous.' A voice that sounded a lot like Dustin popped into his head.

"Tomorrow?" El asked, as she released Lucas.

"It's been a whole week," he replied. "I think maybe we should skip tomorrow."

El's face fell and she shook her head vigorously. "No, no."

"You need a break El," said Lucas, solemnly. "And so do I. We'll try again the day after, okay?"

There was silence for a few beats, and then El whispered, "Okay."

"I'm heading over to Will's place for dinner; he wants to play me some more music Jonathan got for him, so I'll see you then. Say hi to Mike for me."

The last sentence jolted something in Mike, as he realised he'd been so wrapped up in not spending time with El; he had barely seen or even spoken to Lucas in over a week either, except for yesterday when he'd tried to interrogate him about El. Ever since they'd first met, they hadn't gone this long without talking, not even when they'd fought, and he felt guilty for once again putting El in front of his other friends. He was working on balancing things out, but it was taking a lot of effort, El had a way of commanding his attention like nobody else could do.

"Hey there, creep."

Nancy's voice made him jump a mile, and he turned to scowl at his older sister who had snuck up beside him while he'd been lost in thought.

"Spying on Lucas and your girlfriend?" she asked.

"I'm not spying," he said, defensively. "And she's not my girlfriend." He surprised himself with the bitterness in his tone, and he saw Nancy trying to smother a laugh.

"But you want her to be, right?"

"No!"

"Right, so you'd be okay with it if she was Lucas' girlfriend instead?"

He opted not to answer that question. "Maybe she doesn't want to be anyone's girlfriend," he snapped. "I don't even know if she knows what a girlfriend is."

"I'm sure you could explain it to her," said Nancy, with a smirk.

Sure he could. He vividly remembered that time in the cafeteria almost exactly one year ago, when he'd tried to do just that. He'd stumbled over his words and managed to confuse not only El, but himself too. And nothing but a mixture of adrenaline, fear, and an utter loss of his senses could have explained what had happened next. Though he had to admit, that part had been pretty awesome. He couldn't believe he'd managed to screw up the courage to actually do it. And she hadn't pushed him away, or melted his brains. She'd actually smiled at him, had seemed pleased. That had been a good moment for him.

"Why don't you ask her if she wants to do something with you tomorrow?" Nancy suggested. "I bet she'd say yes."

Before he could answer, the doorknob rattled and turned and the door swung open to reveal El, looking a little put out, but she smiled when she saw them.

"Hi Mike. Hi Nancy."

However irritated and confused he was with her and Lucas, Mike had always been a sucker for that smile, and felt his annoyance melting away.

“Hi El! Did you and Lucas have fun today?”

Nancy rolled her eyes as her little brother and his almost sort-of girlfriend fell into a conversation and completely forgot her existence. For so many years, Mike had been nothing but a constant source of annoyance to her, and she'd counted down the years till she could go to college and be rid of him. But since all the craziness of the past year, and particularly El's arrival, she'd seen a whole other side to him. He was so kind and gentle with El, who in return, thought he'd hung the moon.

Mike hadn't coped well when she'd been gone. He'd tried his best, and succeeded enough to fool their parents, but Nancy had known better. It had been tough to watch her kid brother suffering so much, and it made her wonder constantly how something so screwed-up could ever have happened in the nowhere-town of Hawkins.

She'd noticed a bit of tension between El and Mike these past few days, but she couldn't tell if it was adolescent drama or something more serious. El was being secretive, and Mike was frustrated, but they weren't openly hostile to one another. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Her mother and father were blissfully ignorant, and for that she was grateful. She didn't want them to know the full extent of what had happened last year, and how close she and Mike had both come to dying. They'd never let her out of the house again, and they might even send El away, which would crush Mike. So she would keep quiet, but keep an eye on things.

El made a beeline for the kitchen, probably in pursuit of Eggos, and Mike trailed after her. Nancy winked at him as he went by and made him flush with embarrassment.

“Just ask her,” she said. “She'll say yes.”

“Jerk,” he hissed under his breath.

“Brat,” she shot back as he disappeared through the door. At least some things hadn’t changed.

El was tired, like she always was after spending a day using her powers and she looked forward to eating a few Eggos and getting some sleep. But what would she do tomorrow? She’d been counting on another day of practice with Lucas and now there was an entire day waiting to be filled. She was still weak. Little by little, her powers were getting stronger but she was still nowhere even close to the level of power she had once had. She was not ready to defend herself, or anyone else from a small dog, let alone powerful men with guns. Why didn’t Lucas understand how important this was? And she couldn’t do it without him. She’d promised.

She opened the package of Eggos, and from the corner of her eye, she saw Mike shifting from foot to foot, seemingly nervous, and smiled to herself. She liked it when he got flustered; it was cute. And it made him do things like in the cafeteria. She didn’t know the word for what had happened there, but she had liked it a lot.

She missed spending time with him. Lucas was wonderful and she was so glad they were friends, but he wasn’t Mike.

“El?” Mike’s voice was quieter than usual, almost as if he didn’t actually want her to hear what he was about to say.

“Yes?”

“Do you, uh, want to go into town with me tomorrow?” he asked in a rush. She didn’t understand why that would make him so nervous. He went into town all the time with the other guys.

“To see Dustin, Will and Lucas?” she asked.

“No!” he said hurriedly. “I mean...no. Not the others. Just us. You and me. Together, you know? Like a...” he trailed off.

“Like a what?”

It seemed that he simply couldn't bring himself to say the last word, whatever it was, and so he dropped the thought completely.

"You've been so busy lately, I don't get to see you much. What do you think?"

She wanted to. She really, really wanted to. The idea of a whole day just with Mike was incredibly inviting. But surely he would figure out what was going on if they were alone for that long, and then everything would be ruined. It wasn't worth losing her new life and her new family just for one day of fun.

Reluctantly, she turned toward him to tell him no, but she made the mistake of looking at his face. He looked so hopeful, and she knew if she said no it would make him sad. She hated the thought of making him sad.

She couldn't do it.

Maybe it would be all right, just for one day. She would just have to be on her guard, and be very, very careful...

"Okay Mike," she said, and his face lit up. "That would be nice."

Notes for the Chapter:

I envision another 2-3 chapters for this story and I hope you'll stick around to see them.

5. Chapter Five

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks as always for your comments and kudos. They mean a lot to me. In this chapter you'll find a lot of Mileven and a little plot. Enjoy!

Mike woke early the next morning. The sun's rays were just beginning to peek over the horizon when he opened his eyes and he slammed his hand down on his alarm clock just before the clock radio kicked in. He groaned. Time to get up and get ready for school.

It was only when he was lurching across his bedroom for his closet that it finally hit him. It was Sunday. No school.

So why had he set his alarm?

The house was quiet at this time, but he could hear his mother rattling around in the kitchen, preparing breakfast. She wasn't alone either; he could hear her chatting to someone else. Then he heard the other person respond. Quiet, and just a few words. El.

Right. He was taking her into town today. Just the two of them. Alone. On a date. (Even though he hadn't even been able to say the word in front of her.)

Panic wracked his body. What had he been thinking, asking her out like this? He'd never been on a date before, with anyone. What were you supposed to do? Where were you supposed to go? Was he supposed to plan the whole day, or would it be better manners to let El decide? What if he said something wrong? What if he did something stupid and she wondered why she'd ever liked him in the first place?

What if she didn't even know what she'd agreed to? She might think this was just a fun outing for two friends; she might not have any clue what he hoped to get out of it. She might get mad, or worse, feel uncomfortable around him when she found out they wanted different things. He'd never forgive himself if he lost her as a friend because he

couldn't be satisfied with things the way they were. The fact that she'd found her way back to them was miracle enough; anything else was probably pushing his luck.

Maybe he just wouldn't go. Play it safe, pretend he was sick to keep the status quo intact.

A knock at the door heralded Nancy's arrival, still in her pyjamas and hair tousled from sleep. It was unusual for her to be up so early. She liked to sleep in late when school was out.

"What are you doing up?" he asked accusingly, and she smirked.

"I'm making sure you're not going to chicken out," she said, flatly, and he felt himself go red.

"I'm not chickening out," he said, hot all over with embarrassment.

"You're damn right, you're not." Nancy narrowed her eyes at him. "If you don't go, you'll really disappoint El."

"Really?"

Nancy rolled her eyes. "Don't be an idiot, Mike. She thinks you're the coolest person ever. She spent an hour with me in my room last night trying to figure out what to wear today."

"She did?" The idea that El had felt like she needed to do anything to impress him was absurd. She could turn up in sweatpants for all he cared and she'd still be the prettiest girl in the world to him.

"She sure did." Her voice became gentler. "She's just as nervous as you are. So chill out a little and you'll be fine. You like her, and she likes you. Trust me, the hardest part is over."

It was a mark of how much closer they'd gotten since the Upside Down business, that Mike actually believed her. Once upon a time he would never have dreamed of asking Nancy for advice about anything, and would have rather died than do what she said. But he acknowledged that this was an area she had more expertise in than he did; she'd been seeing Steve for a while until they'd both decided that they were better off as friends. Since then, Jonathan had seemed to find excuses to drop by a lot more these days. He wasn't sure how

he felt about that, and he and Will had made a silent decision not to talk about it.

“Why are you being so nice to me anyway?” he asked, in lieu of actually thanking his big sister. Things hadn’t changed that much, after all.

She scoffed. “I’m not doing it for you. El needs someone to look out for her. Especially when she’s crazy enough to have a crush on you.”

The words stung, but the tone was gently teasing, and he knew Nancy hadn’t meant what she’d said. More importantly, another person looking out for El’s best interests could only be a good thing. He couldn’t be everywhere at once, after all, as the last few days had amply proven.

“She’s already up and eaten half a dozen Eggos,” Nancy said. “Mom said she’s been awake for hours, so hurry up and get ready, little brother. She’s waiting for you.”

El had barely slept all night, equal parts looking forward to spending the day with Mike, and terrified that he would discover her secret. Nancy had helped her pick out something to wear, and suggested things they could talk about in case they were too nervous to start a conversation. While El had appreciated the older girl’s pearls of wisdom, she privately thought they wouldn’t need much help in that area. Even when they weren’t talking, she never felt alone when she was with Mike.

It seemed to take him an eternity to come downstairs and when he finally did, he struggled to meet her eyes, instead she felt his gaze scan her from head to toe. The action reminded her of the lab, where people had always been watching her and observing her, but the feeling of someone’s eyes on her had never made her heart beat this quickly or given her this fluttery feeling in her stomach.

Oh, how she’d missed him, these last few days. She hadn’t realised just how much, until this very moment.

“Hi El,” he greeted her, nervously, and she couldn’t suppress a smile at the slight tremor in his voice. “Are you ready to go?”

“I’m ready, Mike,” she replied, softly. “Are you?”

“Nobody’s going anywhere just yet,” Mrs Wheeler broke in, pointing a wooden spoon threateningly at her son. “Not until you’ve eaten breakfast, Michael. Sit.”

Eleven watched as Mike’s mother fussed over him, pouring him juice, and handing him a plate full of bacon, eggs and toast. It was easy to see why Mike had turned out to be so gentle and caring with a mother like her. It was clear that he had always been surrounded by love and compassion, and she’d bet he’d never gone a day without knowing somebody cared for him. Every day she spent with the Wheelers was more proof that the life she had lived in the lab had been evil and twisted and wrong. Sometimes she wondered why things had worked out this way, why Mike, Lucas, Dustin and Will had gotten families who loved them, and she had gotten the exact opposite. Why couldn’t she have it? Had she done something wrong?

“Have you had enough to eat, El?” Mrs Wheeler bustled by her chair with an empty plate in one hand, and balancing Holly on her hip with the other. “Do you want some milk? Water? Juice?”

She shook her head.

“Okay honey.” One of the many things she liked about Mrs Wheeler was that she didn’t try and force her to talk if she didn’t want to. She seemed to know when to push and when not to, just like Mike did. She’d noticed that he was very much like his mother in many ways, except maybe not at this exact moment. She had a hard time picturing Mrs Wheeler shovelling in food at lightning speed like he was doing now. But, she supposed, nobody was perfect, not even Mike. But he came close.

Half an hour later, Mike was on his bicycle, trying very hard to focus on the road in front of him and not on El’s arms around his waist. It probably wouldn’t bode well for their first date if he sent them both

sprawling onto the sidewalk because he wasn't paying attention. And he'd never forgive himself if he managed to hurt her.

Leaving the house had been both exhilarating and utterly embarrassing. On the one hand, he was about to spend time with El, alone, for the first time in forever. On the other, he'd had to endure the sight of Nancy and his mother cooing over how 'cute' it was that they were going on a date as he and El headed out the door. Which of course had prompted the ever-curious El to ask what a date was as they pedalled away. He'd cobbled together a vague response about it being a way for people who liked each other to spend time together, and left it at that, but had the sinking feeling that the word would probably come up again at some point, when he would need to be a little more specific.

As for activities for them to do on their date, it had been tricky to make plans. He had been constrained by two things. One, activities like the movies and the arcade cost money, more than his allowance would stretch to, and two, those places carried the risk of running into his friends. If they found out what was going on, they would have a field day. He'd never hear the end of it, and even worse, El would want to know what they were laughing about, so he'd have to explain it to her. Just the thought was mortifying.

Instead he'd planned to ride around town for a while so she could see it up close (because the only time she'd been so far had been in the car which didn't give a lot of time to take in the scenery.) Then he would use the small amount of money he'd managed to scrape together to take her to the ice-cream store (risky, as Dustin visited nearly every day, but she loved the stuff so much.) They could then spend the afternoon in the park (because she loved trees and nature) and be home by dark, as per his mother's orders. Of course, if she decided she'd rather do something else, he'd do his damndest to make it happen, even if it meant facing the scorn of his friends. At the end of the day, the important thing was to make her happy.

Riding around town didn't take much longer than an hour, as Hawkins was a small town and there wasn't really all that much to see. Thankfully, it was still fairly early in the day so there weren't many people out and about yet; he knew she got nervous around crowds, and her unusual appearance and short hair made people

want to stare. He wished they wouldn't, it made her incredibly self-conscious and he never wanted her to feel like she didn't fit in. Sure, she was a little different, but that was what made her El, and he wouldn't change a thing about her.

When they got to the main street, her eyes were drawn to the store windows, full of gadgets and pretty things, and she proceeded to drag him into every one. As much as he wanted to give her everything that she wanted, he was forced to explain to her that you couldn't just take things you wanted from stores, you had to buy them, and they didn't have enough money to do that. She'd looked disappointed for a moment, but then happily returned to browsing through the selection. He took note of the things she liked. Christmas wasn't all that far away and he wanted to make sure he got her the perfect gift. He should have enough money if he started saving now.

Last Christmas, he'd been miserable, missing her terribly and wishing he could see her again just one more time, and today she was here beside him, chattering away as though she'd never left.

By the time they were done with the stores (considering how few there were it had taken a long time) the sun was high in the sky. He handed over his carefully saved money (plus a few extra dollars borrowed from Nancy) at the ice-cream parlour to get them each a double scoop cone, which they ate as they walked his bike over to the park.

They found a nice spot just a little way from the main playground, and slid onto the solitary bench that stood there, sitting close, but not too close. He glanced sideways at her. She'd been quiet for a while. Of course, that probably had a lot to do with the ice cream, but still he couldn't help thinking that there was something else bothering her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, after another few minutes of silence.

She smiled at him. "Yes. I'm happy to be with you."

Predictably, he felt himself blush. "Well thanks El, I'm happy to be with you too."

The hand that wasn't holding her ice cream was resting on the bench

beside her. If he wanted to, he could just reach over and hold it. If he could summon up the guts, anyway.

He was just debating the pros and cons of making such a move, when she spoke again.

“I missed you a lot.”

He’d missed her too, ever since she’d decided to go be best friends with Lucas, but it probably wasn’t a good idea to bring that up. Instead, he tried to look nonchalant. “Well you’ve been busy, the last few days...”

She shook her head. “Not just then. When I was...gone.”

It felt like a block of ice had settled in his stomach, as he understood what she was referring to. She didn’t often talk about the year she’d spent in the Upside Down, and he didn’t like to ask.

“I missed you too. A lot.”

“I was scared there. I’m glad I got back. And found you.”

“So am I. And you don’t ever have to be scared anymore, I promise.”

She smiled at him again. The moment felt right, and if he didn’t seize it now it would pass them by. He screwed up all the courage he could find and reached for her hand. He felt her jolt with surprise when he touched her, but she relaxed when she realised what he was doing and threaded her fingers through his.

“Is this okay?” he asked, just to be sure.
She nodded. “Yes. I like it very much.”

“You do?”

“I like lots of things,” she said. “I like reading and butterflies and Eggos. I like Lucas and Dustin and Will and Nancy and Jonathan and Holly. And your mom and dad, and Hopper and Mrs Byers too. But I’ve always liked you the most of all.”

She was sitting in the sunshine, eating ice cream and holding Mike’s

hand. She couldn't remember the last time she had felt so at peace with the world, and she was so happy she had agreed to do this today. She had been in such a state about her powers that she had forgotten the most important thing about leaving the Upside Down; she was back with the people who cared for her. And maybe Lucas was right. Maybe it was all over. Maybe she really could live the rest of her life in peace with her friends.

"Well, look at this. If it isn't the princess and the frog."

Maybe not.

She felt Mike stiffen beside her and he dropped her hand as Troy, his regular tormentor, emerged from behind a tree, snarling.

"What do you want, Troy?" he asked, trying to sound confident, but she could hear the slight tremor in his voice, and she bet that the bully could too.

"I was just passing through when what should I find but my favourite couple of freaks," said Troy, before he cut his eyes to El. "And I have a score to settle with you, you psycho. Don't think I've forgotten about you breaking my arm."

Fear like she had never known before coursed through her. Here for the first time, she was face-to-face with a known enemy, and she was completely powerless. Just like she had dreaded.

"Leave her alone." She was surprised at the pure venom in Mike's tone as he glared at Troy. As far as he knew, she was still at full power and in no danger whatsoever, but he still had the immediate urge to protect her, even at risk of injury to himself. He was such a good friend. She was so lucky to have him.

Ignoring Mike's arm, which he'd stuck out as a barrier between her and Troy she got to her feet, and turned to face him. This was a delicate situation. Troy had been on the receiving end of her powers more than once, and despite his bluster, she could see in his eyes that he was apprehensive about doing anything to her. If he figured out that she no longer had the ability to snap his limbs if she wanted to, she and Mike could be in trouble.

She couldn't physically harm him, because as she and Lucas had established, it would require too much power and her body wouldn't be able to take it. But there was one thing she could do. She just hoped it would be enough to scare him out of doing anything rash.

She settled for fixing Troy with the same cold glare that she had used at the quarry after rescuing Mike. She had never been so furious with anyone up till then as she had with the boy who had tried to harm her favourite person in the whole world. Troy had been lucky that Mike hadn't been hurt, or a broken arm would have been the least of his problems.

It worked; apparently Troy was still wary of her. But then he turned his attention to Mike, who he clearly perceived as an easier target.

"Going to let your little freak girlfriend fight your battles for you again, Frogface?" he sneered. "Or do you want to take me on like a real man?"

He started forward; Mike's face turned chalk white. She had no choice; she had to intervene. She closed her eyes, imagined Lucas' encouraging voice, and focused on the tree that stood nearby.

Just like the tree at Lucas', the branches began to move. Without a breath of wind around that day, it gave the eerie impression of the tree coming to life. She made sure a branch or two snapped close to Troy's face, and was pleased to see him swallow, nervously. She was counting on his false bravado to fail him, as he remembered what usually happened to him in the face of her power.

She was beginning to tire. She felt her nose start to bleed, Mike was saying something to her but she couldn't make out the words. Troy was looking unsettled, but he was still standing there.

It wasn't working. She could feel her strength leaving her. Beside her, Mike was beginning to panic as blood began to stream from her ears too. She had to keep trying, if she lost consciousness Mike would be completely unprotected. She couldn't let that happen. She summoned up every last ounce of strength she possessed, focused it on the bully, and pushed.

Troy and Mike both cried out, Troy in surprise, as the last small fraction of her energy sent him reeling back a few paces, and Mike in despair, as her knees gave out from under her and the world went black.

Notes for the Chapter:

I hope to update relatively soon, and I hope you'll be back when I do. Please feel free to leave feedback, I'd love to hear what you think.

6. Chapter Six

Notes for the Chapter:

My apologies for the wait on this chapter, and many thanks to everyone who has been reading, leaving kudos, commenting and so on. You guys are amazing and I appreciate every one of you.

Since season 2 has happened, I suppose it's fair to say that this story is now technically an AU. I will weave whatever canon details I can into the next chapters but since almost all my theories were wrong it could be a challenge.

Please enjoy.

No matter how many times he witnessed it, Mike didn't think he would ever get used to watching El collapse. It was the same every time, bleeding from her ears and nose, her eyes rolling back in her head, and then suddenly that horrible moment when her body just gave up, and she crumpled to the ground.

And just like every time, he wasn't beside her to catch her. After the quarry, the Demogorgan, and now again, he never seemed to be in the right place at the right time, and he hated himself for that. After all she did for him, all the times she had saved them all from certain death, he couldn't even do this simplest of things for her, to give her even the smallest measure of comfort. Instead, he stood there like an idiot, watching the most important person in his life sacrifice herself to save his skin. Again.

He rushed to her side, cursing himself for not being taller, stronger, better. Strong enough to deal with Troy himself, so she wouldn't have to, to be able to protect *her* for a change, instead of cowering behind her like the wastoid he was. She was unconscious, but he could see her chest rising and falling slightly, which told him she was at least breathing. He glanced around to see that Troy had apparently fled, that last-ditch effort she'd employed had done the trick, but at a high cost.

He had seen her flip vans, crush brains, and much more, and still get up again after only a few minutes, but here she was, spent, after something as small as dealing with Troy. Sure, to someone like Mike, any upper hand gained over Troy was tantamount to the overthrow of a dictatorship. But this was *El*. El, a bonafide, straight-from-the-comics, honest-to-God *superhero*. Troy was nothing to her. If she wanted to, she should have been able to crush him without breaking a sweat.

Something was wrong, very wrong.

He shook her gently, called her name.

“El? El? Are you okay? Wake up, please...”

She felt boneless. She felt as though every last shred of energy had left her body. Movement seemed impossible. Thought was excruciating. She would probably lie here forever (wherever ‘here’ was) until she died. And she would deserve it. For being weak.

Papa had agreed.

“What good are you to me like this?” he would say, when she had a bad day. *“How can I be proud of you when you fail me?”*

She was so tired. She wanted to sleep. But somewhere nearby, a voice kept calling her name over and over.

“El? El! Please wake up. You gotta wake up! Come on El...”

It was a familiar voice, the voice that had guided her through dark times; that had made the fear and loneliness lessen even where there had been nowhere else to turn.

Mike. He was panicking, she could feel him shaking her, hear the distress in his voice.

“El, please! You’re scaring me. Just open your eyes for me, please. Please.”

Her eyelids felt like they weighed a ton, but somehow she found the force of will to prise them open for Mike, and she heard his sigh of relief as his face came swimming back into focus.

She was lying on grass, and there was blue sky above her. Mike was kneeling beside her, beaming at her, though she noticed he was gripping her hand so hard it hurt.

“Mike.” Weakly, she squeezed his hand. He immediately got the message, and loosened his grip, but didn’t let go. That was good, because it was the last thing she wanted.

“Hey, El.” Gone were the frantic tones of only moments ago, now he adopted the soft, gentle tenor he used with her most of the time, and she let it wash over her like cool water. “Are you okay?”

“Tired,” she sighed.

“I know.” He was now clasping her hand in both of his. His hands were warm. “I’m so sorry, El.”

She had no idea what on Earth he could possibly have to be sorry for, but before she could ask him, the reason she was even in this position came roaring back. Painfully, she jerked her head to the side, trying to see past Mike, to where the bad boy had been, the one who hurt Mike at school, who would have hurt him again if she hadn’t stopped him. Where was he?

“Bad,” she said.

“He’s gone,” said Mike soothingly. “You made sure of that. You were awesome, El.”

“Safe?” she asked.

“Yes,” he hastened to assure her. “You’re safe.”

“No.” It seemed this was one of the rare occasions when Mike didn’t understand her meaning right away. “Keep *you* safe.” She’d never

forgive herself if Troy had gotten his hands on him because she hadn't been strong enough, but a quick assessment of his face didn't show any new injuries. The last remnants of the black eye Troy had given him last week were just starting to fade away.

"I'm fine," he said, shortly. Was it her imagination, or did he sound a little irritated about that? Was he angry with her? What had she done wrong? Did he *know*? Did he know she had lied to him about her powers?

Friends don't lie. The words rang through her head, like one of Papa's scoldings; harsh and stinging like a whipcrack. She had broken one of the most sacred rules of friendship. He would probably be furious with her, and with good reason.

"Angry?" she asked, fearfully, her worst fears seemingly coming true, but he let out a little laugh and shook his head, softness in his eyes that she had come to associate with one of their moments, the ones where she felt that there was nobody else in the world. She loved those moments.

"No El," he said softly, "I'm not angry. Not with you, anyway."

"Then, why?"

"It doesn't matter now." He sounded more sad than angry now, and she wondered at the sudden shift in his mood. "We have to move you," he said. "If anyone sees you lying on the ground here, it could look suspicious. Can you stand?" he asked, and then cut his eyes away from her in embarrassment. "I'm sorry El, I uh, I don't think I can lift you."

Physical strength had never been Mike Wheeler's forte. He had never been good at sports, hated gym class with a passion, and limited his outdoor activities to biking, or walking around Hawkins with his friends. Thankfully, Dustin, Lucas and Will weren't really the sporting type either, so there had always been someone to stand with in gym class, hiding from the watchful eyes of Coach Trigger. Nicknamed "The Gunslinger" by the students of Hawkins Middle, he had a loud voice, a short fuse, and a marked disdain for the non-sporty population of the school.

Mike had always made his peace with that, knowing his future career would never depend on throwing a pass or scoring a goal. He was growing much taller these days, which was good, and his slender, slighter (Nancy called it 'scrawny') build hadn't ever really given him any significant pause.

Until now.

El was exhausted, her energy resources almost entirely depleted from saving the day again. And he didn't even have the strength to carry her the few steps back to the bench. He remembered Dustin in the school the day they'd lost her, scooping her up so easily and for a moment, the envy he felt toward his friend was almost overwhelming.

Weak, scrawny, useless Mike Wheeler. He didn't deserve someone as amazing as El. No wonder she preferred to spend her time with Lucas these days.

Somehow, between the two of them, they managed it. She looped an arm around his neck, and leaned heavily against him, and after a few attempts, she managed to shakily stand. For the first time, he truly understood the meaning of the phrase 'dead weight' as he supported her as well as he could, and they slowly lurched towards the bench. He wasn't sure which of them was the more relieved when they finally reached it. The moment she felt the hard wood beneath her, El slumped against him, head on his shoulder, and he kept an arm around her to hold her there.

"You okay, El?" he asked, for what felt like the billionth time, and she made a small whimpering noise that was both heartbreaking, and impossibly endearing.

"Okay," she sighed, softly. "Promise."

She closed her eyes, and settled more comfortably against him, as he racked his brains trying to figure out what they should do now. She was in no state to walk back to his house. He couldn't ride her back on the bike for the same reason. Christ knew he wouldn't be able to carry her. Anyway, if they turned back up to the house with her in this state, his mother would be bound to ask questions. They didn't

know the full story of last year. When El had moved in, Chief Hopper and Mrs Byers had advised him to tell them both only the bare minimum. People from the lab could still be looking for her, the fewer people who knew the details, the better.

His mom would insist on taking El to the doctor, possibly even the hospital. People would poke and prod at her, ask questions, frighten her. And possibly find out her secret. He couldn't let that happen.

What they needed was someplace they could go to be safe until she got her strength back. Somewhere where people knew the truth.

He groped in his backpack for his SuperCom, praying that he was in range.

"Will? Are you there?"

Crackling static answered him. He tried again, and again, until finally, Will's soft voice came through.

"Mike? What's up?"

Mike had the feeling that relaying the whole story over the radio probably wasn't the wisest course of action, so he cut to the chase.

"Is Jonathan around?"

Lucas had ended up spending the night at Will's place. Mrs Byers had ordered pizza (which had been a relief as she wasn't the world's best cook) and Jonathan, at Will's pleading, had joined them both in watching Indiana Jones. He hadn't said much, (he rarely did) but Lucas thought he had enjoyed it. When the movie was over, Jonathan went to his bedroom, and Will and Lucas had spent a few hours reading comics before Mrs Byers had told them both to get some sleep. All in all, it had been a nice, normal kind of night, the kind he'd thought for a while they'd never be able to have again, after all the weirdness. It had felt good.

Weirdness, however, was never far away, he realised now, as he

watched Jonathan seize his keys from the kitchen bench and hurry out the door. He'd been in the bathroom when Will had gotten Mike's SOS, so he hadn't heard it himself, but Will gave him the gist of it.

"Something happened," he said, with a worried frown. "He wouldn't say what. Something about El."

They waited impatiently for the sound of Jonathan's motor in the driveway, and about half an hour later, it finally came. They dashed out the door with Mrs Byers, (whom Will had relayed the situation to when she'd asked why Jonathan had taken off so suddenly) and met the car as it trundled to a stop.

Jonathan stepped out and opened the back door. Mike carefully slithered out of the backseat, supporting a lethargic-looking Eleven, who was clearly unsteady on her feet. Mike impatiently waved away Jonathan's helping hand, as El clung to him, and the two of them picked their way to the door.

She lifted her tired eyes, which connected with Lucas,' and smiled at him. He could see the residue of a recent nosebleed, and therefore could hazard a guess at what had happened. She'd had to use her powers, and pushed herself too hard. Just as he'd feared she would.

She seemed to be thinking along the same lines, as she abruptly dropped her gaze from him, guiltily. Mike noticed this exchange, and cast a curious glance between the two of them, but immediately snapped his eyes back to El when she squeezed his hand.

After Mike and Mrs Byers settled El on the couch, and covered her with a blanket, Will and Lucas carefully approached her. Her eyes were open but she still seemed exhausted, Mike hovering anxiously nearby.

"Dude, what happened?" Lucas asked him, and Mike reluctantly tore his gaze from El to hastily tell them the story. Of course it had been Troy, that asshole just didn't know when to quit.

"I don't get it though," Mike said, once he'd finished. "How'd she get so tired, so fast? She's done way bigger things than just dealing with that jerk. But she was really struggling, I could tell." He paused. "It

was awful.”

Will made a sympathetic face, while Lucas tried (and failed) to look surprised. Mike homed in on him and Lucas knew in that moment that he'd been caught out.

Oh boy.

“D’you think it was something to do with.... the Upside Down?” Will piped up nervously, and Lucas was grateful because it diverted Mike’s attention away from him before he could make a scene. As Will continued to pepper Mike with questions Lucas turned his attention to El, who had been listening to Mike’s retelling with a frown on her face. She looked pale, and sweaty, but oddly, when she reached for his hand, her fingers felt like ice.

“Lucas, I’m sorry.” El was fixing him with one of those stares where it felt like she was burrowing into his brain and reading his mind. He’d always found it unnerving, like she was unlocking thoughts and feelings he didn’t even know he had yet, and using them to make a clearer picture of who he was. Frankly, it freaked him out. Mike however, couldn’t get enough of it, and always said it was just her own way of connecting with people. But then again, Mike was the furthest thing from an impartial judge. He worshipped the ground she walked on; she could probably punch him in the face, and he would thank her for it.

“You don’t need to be sorry,” Lucas reassured her now. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

With an obvious effort, she shook her head. “Broke the promise,” she said. “Used my powers without you.”

“It was an emergency situation El,” he said. “You had to do it to keep you and Mike safe. I’m not mad.”

Even as she smiled at him in relief, Lucas had to acknowledge the bizarreness of this conversation. This girl had been through incredible hardship, and trauma that nobody could else could even begin to fathom. Even without the superpowers, she was the toughest kid he knew. And here she was, feeling guilty for using her own

extraordinary gifts without running it by him first. Because she'd promised, and a promise was as close to a sacred commandment as she had. It boggled the mind sometimes how a girl who had seen and done so much could still have such a simplistic view of the world, all in absolutes. Light. Dark. Black. White. Good. Bad.

"Promise?" she asked again now, and he couldn't help but smile.

"Promise." She smiled back at him, then closed her eyes and settled back against the couch cushions.

Out of the corner of his eye, Lucas saw Will end his interrogation of Mike, and then walk to the kitchen to get El a glass of water. Predictably, as soon as the distraction had left, Mike's eyes landed back on El. To see her sleeping, and still with her hand in Lucas.' Slowly, he shifted his gaze from her, and onto Lucas.

Lucas had known Mike for the vast majority of his life. During that time, he had seen his best friend in various states of emotion, from hysterical laughter, to sadness, to disdain, to fury, to insecurity, and everything in between. Mike had always been the type to lead with his heart rather than his head, while Lucas had always been the opposite. On top of that, they were both proud, and stubborn as hell. It had gotten them into trouble more than once, and if not for Will and Dustin's balancing influence, they may well have stopped being friends years ago. It was safe to say, feelings weren't really Lucas' thing. But he could pinpoint the one emanating from Mike right now with absolutely no difficulty. Betrayal. He recognized the furrowed brow and the "*how could you do this to me?*" eyes from the time back in fifth grade when Lucas had been made volleyball captain in gym. He had picked Dustin as his teammate, leaving Mike to be paired up with Henry Mathison, who *stank*, both literally and figuratively.

Lucas had felt guilty that day, he really had. Mike had a way of making even the smallest slight seem like a mortal injury; he really could be dramatic sometimes. But today, Lucas met the accusation with a calm expression because he knew good and well that he hadn't done *anything* wrong.

El was his friend. She had asked for his help so he'd given it to her. He hadn't agreed with her decision not to tell Mike, but he'd

respected it, because that was what friends did. Also, whether Mike liked it or not, he was not the last word in all things Eleven.

“You knew about this, didn’t you?” Mike asked, softly. “She told you.”

“Yes.”

“And she didn’t tell me. And neither did you.”

“No.”

Mike pinched the bridge of his nose. Lucas could see him gearing up for a fight, and sighed; they’d been here before. Almost a year ago to the day, nose-to-nose in a junkyard, fighting about Eleven, and this time, no Dustin or Will around to mediate, and no El to intervene if things got out of control. Mike was too upset and worried and lovesick to be reasonable right now, so it was down to Lucas to be the rational one.

“Come on, Mike,” he said, inclining his head to the front door. “Let’s talk.” It took a colossal effort not to roll his eyes when Mike hesitated, clearly not keen about leaving El’s side.

“She’s fine,” Lucas said. “She’s sleeping. Nothing’s going to happen to her. Now come on.”

They were on the front porch for all of five seconds before the outburst came. He could see it building in Mike from his clenched fists to his poker-straight posture, until it came spilling out in a wave of fury.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?” Mike suddenly exploded. “Something’s wrong with her. She could be sick, or worse, and *you didn’t say a word!* What the hell is wrong with you?”

It took the self-control of a saint not to react with equal anger, but Lucas managed it by reminding himself once again, that he was not the guilty party here.

"I didn't tell you because she asked me not to," he said, coolly. "And if it makes you feel any better, she didn't actually tell me either, I kind of found out by accident. But I'm glad I did."

Mike opened his mouth to retort, but Lucas wasn't finished.

"She's been freaking out over it for weeks, Mike, ever since she came back. She's scared as hell. Someone had to be there for her."

"It should have been me!" snapped Mike, viciously. "She's living in my basement, she trusts me, she's my-" he cut himself off abruptly, turning red.

"What, Mike?" asked Lucas. "What exactly is the end of that sentence? You swear she's not your girlfriend. She sure as *hell* isn't just your friend. What is she to you?"

It was only when he'd finished posing the question that Lucas realized how much he wanted to hear the answer. Everyone who saw Mike and El together had no choice but to see two kids who were crazy about each other, but how did Mike see it? Why did he always get so defensive and irritable when people assumed he and El were a couple?

There was a long, long pause. Lucas figured Mike wasn't going to answer, until he let out a deep breath, and spoke, a lot calmer than before.

"I don't know what we are," he said. "I just know that when she's around, I don't ever want her to go away. Everything just kind of... makes sense."

And just like that, all the fight went out of Mike. He slumped down on the porch step, and Lucas followed suit. They sat in silence for a while, watching Will's dog snuffling around in a pile of leaves.

"I wanted to tell you," Lucas said. "I told her she should. But she made me promise not to. And you of all people know how much that means to her."

In spite of himself, Mike let out a chuckle. "That was one of the first things I taught her, that day I skipped school when Will was missing.

Mom came home suddenly and I had to hide her in my closet, and she was scared, so I promised I'd come back for her."

So that was where it began, Lucas thought. El had always treated Mike's word as the highest of authorities; his judgment was to never be questioned. It was amazing that she still had the capacity to have such utter faith in somebody, after all she'd been through, but then, everything about El was amazing. They were so lucky she'd joined the party.

"Is there anything else you want to know?" he asked Mike, who nodded.

"Tell me everything."

So Lucas did. He told Mike about discovering her dropping the Millennium Falcon, about how she'd been practising in secret when they were at school. How she'd sought him out with the SuperCom and enlisted him as an assistant. How they'd spent nearly every day since then practicing, practicing, practicing. How he'd made her promise not to do anything without him there, for fear she'd overdo it in her desperation to get her powers back.

"Did she say why she didn't want me knowing?" asked Mike. "Did I do something wrong?"

It was Lucas' turn to chuckle. "That was the craziest thing of all. She thought you'd get mad at her, that you'd kick her out."

"What!?"

Lucas shook his head. "I told her there was no way in hell that would ever happen, but she didn't believe me. Sometimes I think she forgets she's not in the lab anymore. We don't expect anything from her. She doesn't have to prove anything to us."

"Did you tell her that?"

"Of course. But I have a feeling it'll be a bit more effective coming from you."

Mike let out a long sigh, as the door opened and Mrs Byers poked her

head outside.

“She’s asking for you, Mike,” she reported. Mike immediately rose to his feet. Lucas couldn’t help but laugh.

“Even when she’s barely conscious, she’s still got a hold on you,” he teased. Luckily, Mike recognised it for the good-natured ribbing that it was and didn’t get mad.

“Thanks Lucas,” he said instead. “For watching out for her.”

He stuck out his hand, as per the party rules (Dustin would have been proud), and Lucas shook it.

“She’s one of us now,” he said. “And tomorrow we’ll tell Will and Dustin and we’ll all help her out. Together.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I really hope you guys enjoyed this and that it was somewhat worth the wait. I also hope the next chapter won’t take as long. Thank you again for reading it.

7. Chapter Seven

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks again for reading and commenting. I just love hearing what you have to say. In that spirit, I have taken on board your comments re: Season 2 details. The consensus was a resounding NO. But there are one or two little things that have found their way in here that I don't think take away from the story. If you disagree, feel free to tell me so. I am always open to constructive criticism.

Please enjoy.

The empty soda can shuddered in place for a moment, as unseen forces went to work upon it. Slowly, ever slowly, it began to rise until it was suspended in mid-air, a few inches above the large flat stone it had been sitting on.

“Yeah! Go El!”

Lucas rolled his eyes as Dustin began to holler like a fan at a football game. He, Mike and Will were watching from the sidelines. He was making so much noise, El's concentration was drawn away from what she was doing, and the can clattered back down. Dustin, Will and Mike all groaned in disappointment. She looked apologetically at Lucas, as he sighed in frustration.

“Try again,” he said, patiently. “Focus on what you're doing. Just pretend it's just you and me here, like before. Okay?”

“Okay.”

As relieved as Lucas had been to finally stop keeping secrets from the rest of the party, he had to admit, their practice sessions had gotten a lot louder, a lot more crowded, and a lot less productive. He appreciated that the guys were trying to be supportive, and he was sure El appreciated that too, but there was no denying that things had been simpler without an audience.

She tried again. Again, the empty can began to levitate, and she put all her focus on it. Nevertheless, all too soon, she let it drop to the ground again, and then dropped to the ground herself, wiping her nose, eyes flashing in anger.

“What’s wrong?” she demanded of Lucas furiously. “What’s happened to me?”

Lucas bit back an angry retort. Before he’d met El, telekinetic powers had been something for the comic books. Hell, he was still wrapping his head around the fact that someone like El even existed. How the hell could she expect him to have all the answers about what was going on? *She* was the one with the power, shouldn’t she know?

He restrained himself from saying all this for two reasons. One, it would upset her, and make the process even harder. Two, he’d cop an earful from Mike if he gave even the slightest indication he might be losing his patience with her. The last thing they needed was to get into another shouting match over El, though personally, he thought Mike was a little too overprotective of her at times. She wasn’t made of porcelain, and more to the point, when her powers were on point she could tear all four of them apart in an instant if she wanted to without breaking a sweat.

Well, all *three* of them. Aliens would descend on the Hawkins Middle sports field before she’d lay a finger on Mike. Then again, with all the shit they’d seen, who was to say aliens didn’t exist? It was no harder to believe than Demogorgan and alternate dimensions, after all. But he digressed.

He patted her shoulder, clumsily. “Don’t worry El, you’re probably just tired. Let’s rest for a minute,” he said. “We’ll have a snack, then try again, okay?” He opened the cooler, tossed her a bag of chips, and called over his shoulder to the others. “Come on over, guys. We’re gonna take a break.”

When he’d agreed to let the others attend their practice sessions, he’d made one rule abundantly clear; he was in charge. He had been working with El for long enough to have a pretty clear idea of her current capabilities, and to know how far was too far for her to push herself. Mike hadn’t been too impressed to be sidelined, but Lucas

had been firm. He was the best person for the job. Dustin would push her too hard, and the other two, (especially Mike) wouldn't push her hard enough. If they were going to get anywhere, she needed to challenge herself. Mike would panic the second she faltered and try and get her to stop, and she would listen to him, because she always did.

Lucas and El had a good system going. She knew he would always act in her best interests; she trusted him. The last thing he needed was for the other three to come crashing in and undo all their work.

Like a magnet, Mike zipped to El's side, and she beamed at him as though he'd been on the other side of town rather than just a few feet away. Immediately, they fell into their private little Mike-and-El world, as though Will, Dustin and Lucas were not there. Lucas caught Dustin's eye, and they exchanged eye rolls, while Will watched the pair a little sadly.

"What's up, Will?" asked Dustin, noticing his friend's concern.

"What if we can't fix her?" said Will. "What if they find her? I don't know if he'd be able to handle it." He gestured over to where El was saying something quietly to Mike, who was listening with rapt attention, with that stupid, goofy look he always got around El.

"That's not going to happen," said Lucas, firmly, though the same thought had occurred to him with increasing frequency since the Troy incident.

"That's right!" agreed Dustin, enthusiastically. "This is El we're talking about, she is *badass*. You just don't realise because you haven't seen it for yourself, Will. Not for real. You've only ever seen her do little stuff. You didn't get to see the quarry, or the van..." He trailed off, a slow smile spreading across his face, and Lucas knew he was reliving that awesome El moment. Lucas did too, from time to time; it had probably been his personal favourite 'superhero El' moment. It had after all, been the event that had finally convinced him that she was on their side, and that they could be friends. That he wasn't losing a best friend (Mike) but could be potentially gaining a new one. An *awesome* one.

"That's my point," said Will softly. "What if she *can't* do that stuff anymore? What if something's really wrong?"

There was a brief pause, where they could all hear Mike and El laughing quietly at something behind them.

"So what?" said Lucas. "Even if she can't kick ass anymore, she's still our friend."

"Mike would chop his own arm off before he'd let her disappear again," said Dustin. "And so would I."

"And me," Lucas agreed.

"Me too," said Will. He didn't know Eleven as well as the others did. Of course, he had not been present during that first tumultuous week. Since her return, she'd been hanging out almost exclusively with Mike or Lucas, but he could tell, from the way the others had talked about her, and the way Mike looked at her, that she was important to them. Hence, she was important to him, and he was just as keen as any of them to keep her in the party, where she belonged.

"So we just keep trying," said Lucas decisively, "and if it happens that she can't get her powers back, we take care of her the old-fashioned way. We have her back, just like we do for anyone in the party."

The afternoon wore on.

El's performance for the rest of the day...well to put it politely, one would say it was 'patchy.' To put it accurately however...it was a goddamn disaster.

She tried again and again to lift the can smoothly, and without dropping it. Again and again, it fell back to earth, prompting groans and sighs from the viewing gallery. How Lucas wished they would shut up. They kept putting her off her focus. After every unsuccessful attempt, she'd glance frantically at them as though waiting for a reproof or a scolding. Lucas figured that must have happened in the

lab if she made mistakes. Those bastards probably punished her too. Hurt her. Frightened her. Locked her up. The very idea that anybody could do that to another human being made him furious. But to El? One of the kindest, coolest, most trusting people he had ever run across? It was nothing short of criminal.

Dustin, however, was whooping and cheering and having the time of his life. "It's like the X-Men in real life! It's like Professor X and Jean Grey, except El is both of them!" He nudged Will, who was sitting beside him, drawing. "Dude, how are you not watching this right now? We're getting a real-life display of superpowers. Do you not realise how insane that is?"

Will put down the green crayon he'd been using and reached for the blue.

"Of course I do," he said, calmly. "But I just don't think staring at her and yelling like an idiot is going to help her. It might make her nervous."

His words were punctuated by the clatter of the can falling for the umpteenth time, Lucas' sigh, and El's grunt of frustration. Next to them, Mike sighed too.

"This is my fault," he said, sadly.

"What?" Dustin demanded, his head swivelling around comically fast. Will put down the blue crayon and also turned to his friend.

"How could this possibly be your fault Mike?" he asked. Mike had a tendency to do this; blame himself for things that were completely out of his control. For instance, back in third grade, before Dustin had joined the party, there had been an outbreak of flu in Hawkins during winter vacation. Will and Lucas were spending the day at Mike's place (even then, the Wheeler's basement had been their unofficial meeting point.) When Mrs Wheeler called them up for lunch, they passed Nancy in the hallway. She was just getting over the nasty illness, and had been confined to her room most of the day. However, by an unfortunate coincidence, she happened to venture out just as they were coming up the stairs, and let out an almighty

sneeze as they squeezed past her. Will had always been small and slight, and the combination of these factors with the cold weather meant he too was struck down with the virus and wound up confined to bed for the next week, feeling very sorry for himself.

His mother and Jonathan had made him toast and warm drinks, gotten him blankets and bought him colouring books and comics to help pass the time. His father had told him to toughen up. Lucas visited as often as his parents would allow him to. (Erica had not long been born so they were nervous about him passing it on to her.)

Mike felt so guilty; he could barely look him in the eye for weeks afterwards, despite being assured, by Jonathan, Lucas, Joyce, and Will himself that he was of no fault whatsoever.

It was a trait that had continued to rear its head as they had gotten older, Dustin had joined the group, and Mike had fallen into the role of the pseudo-leader. And now with El's arrival, Mike seemed to feel more responsibility than ever. Responsible for her safety, her happiness, her education. Responsible for making sure she was getting enough to eat and sleep. Add that to all the mushy feelings he had for El, and his (completely groundless) fears that she didn't like him back, (as if that were even possible, she *adored* him) and Mike was under a lot of pressure.

Will watched his best friend as he observed El and Lucas discuss something in quiet tones. Mike was somehow managing to look at Eleven with his usual soft fondness, while also looking disgusted with himself at the same time.

"It's my fault," Mike said, "because I'm such a pathetic wastoid that I couldn't deal with Troy on my own. So she had to jump in before she was ready, to save my sorry ass." He scowled. "If I weren't such a loser and could take care of myself, she wouldn't have had to help me, and she wouldn't be suffering now."

Dustin and Will exchanged a look. They both knew perfectly well why El had intervened, and it had very little to do with Mike's alleged 'weakness.' However, Mike in his continued infuriating blindness where El was concerned, didn't seem to have picked up on it.

"Dude," said Dustin as though it were obvious, because it *was*, "Even

if you were built like the Incredible Hulk and could have beat down Troy with one hand tied behind your back, she still would've stepped in. Because it's *you*."

Mike scoffed. Dustin resisted the temptation to pick up the stick at his feet and throw it at his dumbass of a best friend. Clearly, he was going to have to spell this out for him. Again.

"Mike, come on. She threw Lucas off you, she pushed you away from the Demogorgan, and the last time she saw you with Troy, she was saving you from falling to your death. How did you expect her to react? The only times she's ever used her powers on or even near you is because she thought you were in danger. Why do you think that is?"

"She doesn't do these things because she thinks you're weak, Mike," added Will.

"How do you know?"

Dustin rolled his eyes, and even Will looked a little exasperated as they again began to tread the well traversed depths of Mike's insecurity about El.

"Put it this way," said Dustin. "If you and I were both sinking in quicksand-"

"Where the hell would we find quicksand in Hawkins?" interrupted Mike.

"It's an analogy," Dustin snapped. "Go with it. Anyway, you and me, sinking in quicksand and then El comes along, who do you think she rescues first?"

"Why are we in quicksand anyway? What were we doing?"

"The quicksand's not important! Stop being a dipshit and answer the question. Me or you? Who does El pick?"

"She'd save us both. You know she would. Who the hell cares which order it happens in?"

Will chuckled, as Dustin threw Mike a look that was part frustration, part pure loathing. Either Mike was thicker than any one of them could have imagined or he was being deliberately obtuse. Either way, his brilliant quicksand scenario wasn't having the effect he had hoped for.

He punched Mike on the shoulder, a little harder than usual because he was being a moron. "Think about it, buddy," he said. "And if you really can't figure it out, the next time you guys hang out, instead of just making goo-goo eyes at each other, why don't you try actually talking to her?"

"I always talk to her!"

Surprisingly, Will was firm. "You're deliberately missing the point, Mike," he said. "Sitting here complaining to us isn't going to solve anything. And you know it."

It was rare for Will to step in during a party disagreement, but when he did, it meant one thing. The discussion was closed.

Across the yard, El and Lucas were having problems of their own. "I can't do it," said El, angrily, glowering at the can. "I used to be strong. Now I am weak."

"You're not weak," said Lucas, patiently. "You used a lot of power on Troy, it was always going to take a while to come back."

"Not this long," she complained. Wordlessly, she turned her eyes on him expectantly, as though waiting for him to suggest some miraculous solution. A little parcel of anger began growing in his chest. A year ago, he was a normal kid, with normal friends and a normal life. Now his friends included a telekinetic girl, a lovesick best friend, and Dustin, and they were all getting on his nerves in their own way. Will was the only one not irritating him right now, mainly because he'd barely said anything.

"So, what can we do?" El persisted in asking. And then suddenly, with a little more heat, "Fix it!"

Her voice was sharp as a whipcrack. Dustin raised his eyebrows, Will flinched, and Mike was on the point of getting up when Dustin reached over and heaved him back down again.

"Let Lucas handle it," he said.

"But--"

"Mike."

The last thing they needed was Mike, with his short temper, and love-addled brain, to intervene. There was copious history on how that would go, none of it good.

"What exactly do you want me to do, El?" asked Lucas, calmly, but with a twinge of irritation in his voice.

"I don't know!"

Lucas resisted the urge to snap at her, closed his eyes, and thought. El had been making steady progress until the incident with Troy. Maybe that was the cause for her problems today, but maybe it wasn't. Something else had changed too; the guys were now here watching. At least one of these two things had to be causing the issue. He needed to isolate which one. Perhaps it was both. But this part wasn't about supernatural powers, this was science. An experiment. He could handle that.

For the next hour, they kept trying, to varying degrees of success. She managed to levitate the can several more times, the longest period being about twenty seconds. The cheering section made so much noise that his mother came out in her apron from the kitchen and wanted to know what they were yelling about. Dustin managed to convince her that they were playing a live-action version of D&D, and then, rolling her eyes, she returned to the house.

Lucas observed El carefully during that hour. Her concentration seemed to break at odd moments, and her eyes tended to flick over to the other guys (specifically, Mike) a lot after a failure. She looked

upset and embarrassed, even though the support from the cheering section had never once wavered, and he could tell she was still angry. It seemed to be radiating from her.

The practice session ended when El blew up the can. They were in hour five of the day, on attempt number nine billion. The telltale sound of metal on stone rang out once again, and El, eyes blazing, glared at it.

Then, the can was gone. One moment it was there, the next, it had disintegrated. Mike, Will, Dustin and Lucas all gaped at the scorch mark on the rock where it had stood. El sank down into the grass, her head in her hands.

Mike was the first to shake himself into action. He approached El cautiously as she began to sob quietly. "El? Are you okay?"

Wordlessly, she reached for him, and pulled him into what must have been a bone-crunchingly tight hug. He hugged her back, whispering, "it's okay, it's okay," over and over. The others quickly averted their eyes to try and give them some privacy.

"Uh, I guess we're done for the day," said Lucas to nobody in particular. "I'll just—" He began gathering up the empty chip packets and non-exploded soda cans from their snack. Dustin and Will sprang up to help him.

By the time they had finished cleaning up the yard and had taken the cooler inside, Mike had consoled El enough that her tears had subsided, and she was on her feet. She was holding tightly to his hand and leaning heavily against him. Sweat was glistening on her brow. She looked beat.

"I'm sorry, Lucas," she said softly, as he emerged from the back door. "For yelling."

She glanced at Mike, who smiled at her approvingly, and Lucas wondered if he'd told her to say that. The thought made him feel a

little hollow. Maybe she didn't actually think of him as a friend after all. Maybe to her he was just someone she had to tolerate in order to spend time with her precious Mike, and who was helping her with her powers.

But, as ever, El surprised him. She dropped Mike's hand, stepped forward, and put her arms around Lucas in a tentative hug. It was nice, but weird. He wasn't really a hugger, as such, and neither was she, at least with people other than Mike. It felt as though he were hugging a distant relative he only saw at Christmas. A second cousin from Sweden, perhaps.

Still, he appreciated the gesture, as well as the soft smile she gave him as they separated. It was enough to convince him that the apology had come from her, and not Mike. That was good enough for him.

"That's okay, El," he said. "Don't worry about it."

But she shook her head. "You're helping me," she said. "You are being a good friend. I was a mouthbreather."

Lucas caught Mike's eye over the top of her head and they both hid a smile. He resolved to teach El some other words when he had a moment. There was a whole world of insults out there beyond 'mouthbreather' and he didn't want her to miss out on it.

"We're all mouthbreathers sometimes," he said. "I forgive you."

The others ended up staying for dinner. His mom had made extra meatloaf and potatoes when she'd noticed they had come over, and they were too polite to refuse her.

It went smoothly enough until Erica, little twerp that she was, put down her glass of milk, smirked evilly at her brother and asked, "Who's the girl, Lucas? Is she your girlfriend?"

"NO!" shouted Lucas and Mike, in unison. Dustin laughed so hard he began to cough, and Mrs Sinclair ran to get him a glass of water. Will grabbed his milk and began to down it, in an attempt to not have to

say anything.

El simply looked confused.

Amused at the uproar she'd created, Erica zoned in on Mike, who had gone slightly pale. Teasing her brother's nerdy friends was almost as good as teasing him.

"Don't tell me she's *your* girlfriend, Mike?" she said, in disbelief. "I mean, really? *You?*"

Mike spluttered. Dustin snorted. Will looked away awkwardly. Lucas silently resolved to kidnap one of his sister's Barbie dolls and give her a buzzcut the moment he could get his hands on his dad's electric razor.

"Girlfriend?" El repeated, and Erica turned her attention on her instead.

"You don't know what that is?" Genuinely confused now, Erica squinted at the unfamiliar girl. She'd thought every girl in the world knew what a girlfriend was. Didn't she watch TV? Movies? Didn't she *read*?

"Mom!" Lucas protested, as Erica opened her mouth to tell the weird girl exactly what a girlfriend was, and hopefully, make Mike squirm a little more.

"*Erica!*" The warning tone in her mother's voice usually wasn't enough to make her back down, but tomorrow Erica had planned to go to the mall with a friend who lived across the street. If she made her mom mad, she might not be able to go.

"Sorry," she said, insincerely, but it was enough to placate her mom. Lucas continued to glare at her. The weird girl still looked confused. Mike looked like he wanted to die.

Erica was satisfied.

As soon as dessert of his mom's famous brownies had been eaten, Lucas' friends made a hasty exit. He took particular note of the interesting greenish/yellowish hue of Mike's face as he opened the

door for El so they could walk home.

Of course, being El, she didn't see anything wrong with taking his hand, beaming up at him and asking, "Girlfriend?"

The door closed behind them. Lucas cringed.

Good luck, Mike.

Notes for the Chapter:

I wasn't planning on Erica making an appearance, but here she is. I hope you enjoyed this chapter. More when I can.